

Organic Bulletin



July 2006

www.ruralni.gov.uk/bussys/organic_production

New plan to grow the organic sector in Northern Ireland

The Organic Action Plan Group for Northern Ireland (OAPGNI) launched their Organic Action Plan at the Balmoral Show 2006.

The launch was conducted jointly by the outgoing Minister, Lord Rooker, and the new Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, David Cairns MP.

The Organic Action Plan outlines the priorities and opportunities for the development of the sector in Northern Ireland. It is hoped that the Action Plan will contribute to the development of local organic production in line with market requirements, whilst increasing the efficiency of organic farming.

Copies of the Organic Action Plan are available from the OAPGNI Secretary (Tel: (028) 9052 4567) or via the DARD website www.dardni.gov.uk/core/dard0220.htm

This was the first appearance for the OAPGNI at the Balmoral Show and proved highly successful.

The group's stand at the Greenmount Country Show on the 24 and 25 June also attracted a lot of attention.

Clover Event

Greenmount Campus is running an event entitled "Clover – Nitrogen for the future" at the Abbey Farm, Greenmount Campus, Antrim on Thursday 3rd August.

This will include information on production of clover-based swards, livestock production, and sward establishment techniques.

Tours start 1.00pm - 4.00pm and 6.30pm - 8.00pm.

For further information ring (028) 9442 6773

New Organic Development Adviser



Francis Breen, Beef and Sheep Development Adviser based in Omagh, has joined the CAFRE Organic Team, with responsibility for Organic Beef and Sheep in Fermanagh and Tyrone.

Francis can be contacted on (028) 8225 3408.

CAFRE's Organic Development Advisers

David Alexander (Organic milk)	(028) 7930 2109
Francis Breen (Beef and Sheep – Fermanagh and Tyrone)	(028) 8225 3408
Michael Doherty (Beef and sheep – Down and Armagh)	(028) 3025 5907
Mike McCorry (Beef and sheep – Antrim and Londonderry)	(028) 9332 2399
Adrian Saunders (Crops and market gardening)	(028) 9442 6765
Joan Hamilton (large scale vegetables)	(028) 9442 6683
Jim Purvis (poultry)	(028) 8676 8123
Charlotte Moore (Senior Organic Development Adviser)	(028) 9442 6752

Organic farming scheme – the 'six-month rule'

A small number of producers have recently tried without success to enter land into DARD's Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) more than six months after bringing the land into the conversion process.

OFS regulations stipulate that applications to the Scheme can only be accepted if made within six months of the date on which a certificate of registration is first issued by the inspection authority in respect of the first organic parcel.

This requirement helps ensure that Scheme funds are used as intended, to support farmers from the outset of the conversion process.

Producers are urged to notify the Department promptly when bringing new land into conversion – and to contact DARD as soon as possible if they foresee problems in meeting the 'six-month rule'.

OFS

'With the closure of the current Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan, no new Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) agreements can be signed after 31 December 2006. Payments to existing OFS participants will continue, but no new parcels of land can be brought into the scheme after that date.

A Scheme will open once the NIRDP 2007-13 is approved by the European Commission (see below).

NIRDP - DARD consultation on the new Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan 2007-2013

On 20 June 2006 DARD launched a consultation on the draft NIRDP 2007-2013.

As part of the consultation DARD invites comments on the design of a future Organic Farming Scheme. The consultation document can be accessed through the DARD website: www.dardni.gov.uk/consultations and reference to the Organic Farming Scheme 2007-2013 can be found under chapter 5.3.3.3 Measure 2.3: Agri-Environment Programme (at pages 44-52). Comments are invited by Monday 14 August 2006 to ruralpolicy.branch@dardni.gov.uk

Organic Farming (Conversion of Animal Housing) Scheme

Producers will have heard that the final deadline for payments under the Organic Farming (Conversion of Animal Housing) Scheme has been extended until 31 March 2007.

All scheme activity, except for post-payment inspections, will cease on that date.

DARD strongly advises that those approved applicants, who have not yet done so, should submit their claim form as early as possible, and certainly no later than 31 December 2006.

The Department may not be able to complete the payment process for claims received after that date.

Maintaining good quality grass/clover swards mid-season

Achieving satisfactory live-weight gains from high quality grass/clover swards in mid/late season is dependant upon good grassland management during the critical April/May period.

Unfortunately, the continuous cold, wet weather we experienced this spring resulted in a later turnout on the majority of organic farms. When this is coupled with the difficult grazing conditions that were experienced, maintaining swards in a leafy, vegetative condition became extremely difficult.

In early June the situation changed dramatically when we experienced very warm, dry weather. Almost over-night, a high percentage of grass on grazing swards, particularly those under-grazed earlier on, became stemmy and produced seed heads.

The focus now has to be to ensure that such swards are brought back to a leafy, more productive state as soon as possible. Management decisions to ensure that this occurs will depend on whether grass is rotationally grazed or set-stocked.

Rotational Grazing

Rotationally grazed swards should be well grazed down, preferably using dry cows or dry ewes (if available), or alternatively, topped to a height of 5 cm (2"). Topping higher than this will only have a cosmetic effect on the sward. Fields that are topped too high may look tidier in the short-term, but there will be no real long-term benefit in terms of sward density, productivity or the daily liveweight gain.

If topping is carried out on a dry day the stock will graze off most of the toppings.

Clover growth is enhanced under a rotational grazing system if the "rest" period between grazings is allowed to increase to approximately 4 weeks from mid-season. This is particularly important this year, as the cold, wet conditions depressed clover growth earlier in the year.

Set-Stocking

Set-stocked swards require a different approach as the whole area cannot be cleaned off/topped at the same time, as this would have a severe impact on grass growth rate. The most appropriate approach is to top approximately 25 to 30% of the area every 7/8 days until the whole area has been topped.

This is a compromise between:

- not lowering the average cover too severely, thereby impacting negatively on the potential of the sward for growth; and
- ensuring that the whole area is returned to a leafy, productive state as soon as possible.

As for rotational grazing, set-stocked swards should also be topped down to 5 cm (2") for maximum benefit. Even in mid/late season, cattle, as well as sheep, can still perform very well on relatively short swards ie 7.5-10 cm (3-4"), provided that they are dense and carry a high proportion of green leaf (at least 80%) relative to stem.

Beef and Sheep Development Group

Organic production brings with it a set of situations and circumstances that are often unique to those involved in the sector. It is important therefore that organic beef and sheep producers meet regularly with each other and discuss issues of mutual concern and interest.

At a recent farm walk on the farm of James Clarke, Poyntzpass, it was agreed by those attending that a development group should be set up in NI for organic and in-conversion beef and sheep producers. This group will have the aim of improving financial returns through more efficient production.



Issues could include: winter feeding, sourcing organic livestock, animal health, alternative cropping, grassland management and sourcing organic manure and fertilisers.

For the group to be worthwhile it is important that members are open and honest, and are willing to share ideas, accept challenges from others and are willing to adopt change.

Throughout the farming world other groups where this has happened have been highly successful.

Initially it is proposed to have 2 regional groups, that meet regularly and come together at certain times for issues of collective interest.

Each group will also have a chairperson regularly communicating with their counterpart.

The first meeting of each group is proposed for end July / early August, and if you want more information contact Michael Doherty (Armagh, Down, Tyrone and Fermanagh) on (028) 3025 5907 or Mike McCorry (Antrim and Londonderry) on (028) 9332 2399.

There will be an opportunity for anyone interested in growing organic cereals to get together on farm prior to harvest time.

If you want more details contact Adrian Saunders on (028) 9442 6765.

Investing in your Farm Business – the New Entrants Scheme?

What are the benefits of the New Entrants Scheme?

The New Entrants Scheme provides aid to facilitate the establishment of young farmers in an agricultural or horticultural business. Young farmers are a key factor in the development of rural areas and support to this category of farmer is considered a priority.

The Scheme offers up to £17,000 of aid over a five-year period to eligible applicants. Assistance is paid in the form of reimbursed interest on a loan for an agreed project with an agricultural purpose (includes horticultural projects). The £17,000 limit is a maximum and plans that incur a lesser total amount of interest over a five-year period are acceptable within the Scheme.

Who is eligible for the Scheme?

Applicants must be under 40 years of age at the time of receipt of the first application form (NES 2).

The second requirement, 'to have been established as head of holding for the first time during the twelve month period prior to the date of initial application', is more complex. Business Reference Numbers and associated names are used to determine head of holding status and these examples may assist understanding.

If a young farmer has his/her name associated with the DARD Business Reference Number in addition to one other name, to become 'head of holding' will require a letter from a solicitor or accountant to confirm this new status and a 51% share in the profits.

In the situation where the young farmer's name is not associated with the Business Reference Number, it will need to be added and a letter from an accountant or solicitor confirming 'head of holding' status and 51% share of profits submitted with the application form.

If a young farmer has had a Business Reference Number in his or her own name alone for more than 12 months, he or she will be ineligible.

Other requirements such as viability of the farm, educational qualifications and membership of a Quality Assurance Scheme can be attained within 3 years of entering the Scheme.

Once eligibility has been established, a business plan is drawn up for the project, a loan is sought and a second stage application (NES 3) is submitted to Orchard House.

CAFRE staff members Philip Downey ((028) 7772 1819) or Colin Rea ((028) 9442 6609) can assist you with each stage of the application process.

Vegetable farm walks

The Organic Market Gardening Development group will be visiting two very different vegetable production units on 25th July.

The first is a larger scale commercial holding specialising in a limited number of crops targeted mainly at supermarkets, the second is an intensive market garden growing for a box scheme.

If you would be interested in attending contact Adrian Saunders on (028) 9442 6765.

Organic lamb event

Dungannon Meats held an organic lamb event in early July.

They wish to source more organic lambs.

Greenmount Campus will be hosting an afternoon event on Thursday 27th July, on the Greenmount Organic Unit, for farmers interested in converting to organic lamb production.

For more information ring (028) 9442 6773.

Study tour

An organic study tour is planned for Thursday 31st August and Friday 1st September visiting beef, sheep and dairy farms in the south of England

It will also be possible to stay over in Bristol to visit the big Organic Food Festival taking place on Sat / Sun 2nd and 3rd Sept.

Details from Mike McCorry on (028) 9332 2399

Moy Park organic poultry



- Moy Park produces organic chicken for the fresh retail supermarkets. i.e. Tesco, Dunnes, Waitrose etc.
- The birds are grown outdoors under the ACOS (Advisory Committee on Organic Standards) Compendium and are inspected and certified by the certification body Organic Farmers and Growers (OF&G)
- The birds are encouraged outside by the use of fences, hedges and trees and are in colonies or flocks of approximately 4,000 birds
- Being a slow growing bird the minimum age at which the birds reach market weight is 71 days
- Moy Park believes that the birds' longer life, low stocking density, and the ability to roam outside, contribute to the excellent taste and texture of the product.

If you are interested in producing organic chicken for Moy Park contact:

Tom McKeown 07778 033786

Brian Gibson 07767 271525

Shelby Caldwell 07887 827186

Joe Lawson 07774 672318

Local organic food guide

An updated guide listing where locally produced organic food is available for purchase.

The guide can also be found on the website: www.ruralni.gov.uk/bussys/organic_production

A paper or emailed copy can be obtained from the author, Adrian Saunders on (028) 9442 6765.

If you directly market locally produced organic food in Northern Ireland, and would like to be considered for inclusion in the guide contact Adrian Saunders.

Growing organic cereals in Northern Ireland

Introduction

Cereal farmers in N. Ireland are operating under similar market conditions to elsewhere in the UK, i.e. low or falling grain prices, rising input prices and the uncertainty over decoupling. Although reducing inputs may be one way forward, organic production is a possibility for a niche market. Most Northern Ireland agriculture is animal and grass-based, but winter-feed is required for organic as for conventional production and organic spring barley or wheat could supply this market. To understand the problems of organic cereal growing, researchers at the AgriFood and Biosciences Institute first surveyed growers and then set up trials to try to answer some of their concerns.

Survey

The survey of organic growers indicated that spring cereals had fewer problems than winter crops and that the main problems were firstly weeds and then diseases.

Trials (2003-5)

A series of trials was set up from 2003 to 2005 at Greenmount Campus, College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, on land in conversion to organic production (organic status was achieved in 2004). In each year, there were three trials (see below): one on spring barley examined the effects of seed rates and cultivars on weed growth; a further spring barley trial and a spring wheat trial looked at the effects of a range of single cultivars and 2-way and 3-way mixtures of these on disease control and yield.

Weed control trial - Spring barley cultivars Dandy; Riviera (2003) or Hart (2004–5) at 400, 450, 500 and 550 seeds m⁻²

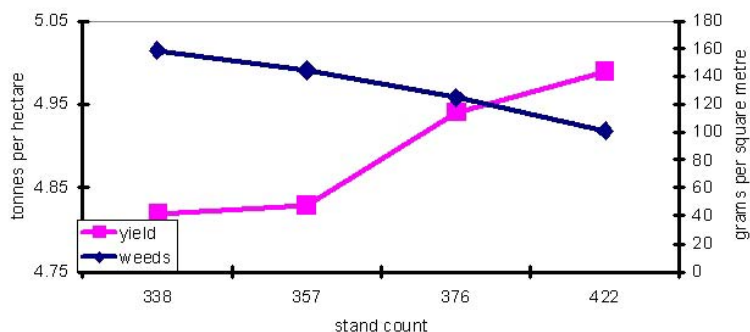
Disease control trials - Spring barley cultivars Annabel, Dandy, Static and Riviera (2003) or Hart (2004–5) singly and in 2-way and 3-way mixtures - Spring wheat cultivars Ashby, Chablis and Paragon singly and in 2-way and 3-way mixtures

Spring barley weed control trials

Different weed species predominated in the different years, chickweed in 2003, fat hen in 2004 and knotgrass in 2005. There were also different amounts of weed – more at the beginning of the trials because of higher residual fertility coming out of conventional agriculture, but in the final year, an increased proportion of weeds compared with the crop.

As might have been expected there was a reduction in the weight of weeds and an increase in the grain yield as the seed rate and thus stand count increased (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Effects of stand count on spring barley grain yield and amount of weed, 2003 -05

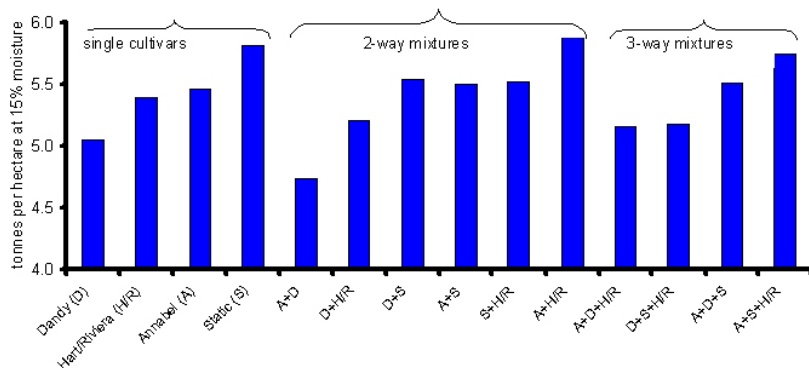


However, the actual increase in yield was quite small (less than 0.2 tonnes per hectare) and not quite significant statistically. Seed rate affected different weed species differently, e.g. in 2005, knotgrass grew significantly better at the higher seed rates than did redshank. Over the three years, Hart or Riviera outyielded Dandy, but there were no consistent differences between the cultivars on controlling weeds.

Spring barley disease control trials.

Rhynchosporium was consistently the most common disease, but it was generally at a low level as were all diseases. There were significant differences between the varieties and mixtures when the amount of green leaf was measured, but results for the mixtures tended to be averages of the individual components of the mixture.

Fig. 2. Effect of varieties and mixtures of varieties on yield of spring barley, 2003 - 05



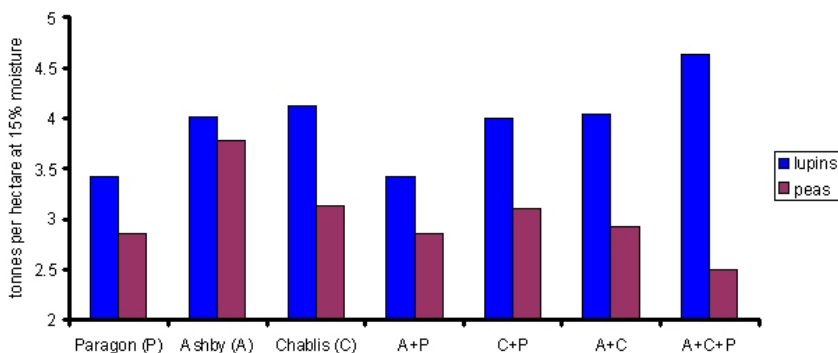
There did not seem to be any advantage in disease control or in the amount of green leaf in using mixtures as against a single variety. Yield dropped with time, possibly due to reduced fertility, and yields of mixtures, as with area of green leaf, tended to be averages of the individual components (Fig. 2).

In 2003, half the trial field had followed lupins and had a high residual fertility, while the other half had followed peas and had a relatively low fertility – there tended to be a higher incidence of rhynchosporium following lupins than following peas.

Spring wheat disease control trials

Septoria tritici blotch was the commonest disease, but, as with spring barley, disease levels were low. Also, as with the spring barley, there were no overall advantages over the three years to using mixtures of varieties. However, in 2003, where half the trial field following lupins had a high fertility and the other half following peas had a relatively low fertility, the 3-way variety mix had the highest yield after lupins, but the lowest after peas (Fig. 3). There was also markedly more septoria on the crop following lupins.

Fig. 3. Effect of variety, variety mixtures and field history on yield of spring wheat in 2003



Conclusions

Results tended to confirm the grower survey in that weeds were the major problem in the organic cereal trials in all three years, even though the weed species differed from year to year. Increasing seed rate did reduce the weed mass and possibly led to a small increase in yield, but that needs to be balanced against the extra cost of seed. Only two varieties were compared for weed suppression and no difference could be discerned. More varieties need to be compared.

Disease in both spring barley and wheat was relatively low, although tending to be higher when there was higher fertility. Using mixtures did not confirm the conventional wisdom that they reduce disease. However, disease levels were low and differences in yield claimed elsewhere for mixtures versus

single varieties are only of the order of 5-10%, making it difficult to demonstrate statistically. Having said that, it may be more practical to use a single highly disease-resistant variety than a mixture where there will be different agronomic characteristics from the individual components.

Research into organic cereal growing is continuing, concentrating on the area of mechanical weed control. For more information on this work contact Dr Peter Mercer on (028) 9025 5257.

What's on ?

- **Organic lamb event** – Greenmount Campus, Thursday 27th July - For more information ring (028) 9442 6773
- **Clover event** – Thursday 3rd August, Abbey Farm, Greenmount Campus - Tours **start** at 1.00pm – 4.00pm and 6.30pm – 8.00pm - For further information ring (028) 9442 6773
- **Organic Study Tour** - Thursday 31st August and Friday 1st September
- Details from Mike McCorry on (028) 9332 2399
- **Organic fortnight** – Soil Association – 2-17 September 2006 – Information: 0117 314 5000
- **Green Living Fair** – Castle Espie, Comber on 16th and 17th September
- **2-day Course** – 'Introduction to Organic Production' – venue to be announced
24 and 31 October – to book a place ring Caroline on (028) 9442 6773

Contributions from:

Alison Armstrong, Michael Doherty, Philip Downey, Tom McKeown, Linda Meldrum, Peter Mercer, Martin Mooney, Charlotte Moore, Adrian Saunders, David Wright.

Compiled by Adrian Saunders

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